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Woodford County Historical Society – Metamora Courthouse come together for common goal

A key piece of Woodford County history in Metamora is getting by with a little help from friends. Earlier this summer, the Wood-ford County Historical Society was given the green light to resurrect a committee called "The Friends of the Metamora Courthouse." The goal of this group is to help preserve the courthouse and its legacy.

The Metamora Courthouse has been a prominent fixture in the community and one rich with history. But last year around this time, the future of the almost 200-year-old building was looking a bit bleak.

Back when it was built in 1845, the court-house served as the place for law and justice in Woodford County. A young lawyer by the name of Abraham Lincoln once practiced there, and when he later became one of the most iconic presidents in America's history, the small village of Metamora became more than just a dot on the map.

But over the years, things changed. The courthouse in Metamora was simply too small to accommodate the county's growing needs, and finally in 1896, Metamora relinquished its county seat title to Eureka, where a bigger and grander courthouse was to be built.

The Metamora Courthouse became a community center of sorts for a time, but in the early 1920's, it was sold to the state of Illinois where it was restored to a museum and became an official state historical site. The courthouse and its upkeep were in the hands of the state.

For a while, that was okay. At one time, there was a superintendent along with one almost full-time employee who was assigned to that building. "That was their job, they were there every day, and they were looking out for that building," said Sue Knepp, the treasurer of the Woodford County Historical Society.

The years went by and as they did, they brought many cuts in state government spending. Because of this, the Metamora Courthouse suffered, as did many other historic places in the state.

The site still has a superintendent, Jeff Saulsbery, but Metamora is just one of five historical venues he over-sees. And though he cares about and advocates for the preservation of the courthouse, getting money from the state to pour into the cause is difficult. The courthouse funding is always at the mercy of the state budget.

"Jeff is absolutely fabulous to work with, but his hands are tied," said Sue. Last August, Jeff put out a plea on the courthouse's Facebook page. He was planning on holding a meeting in the courtroom, and he extended an invitation to all those who were interested in volunteering and keeping the courthouse open more regularly.

It was a well-attended meeting, and after-ward a dozen or so volunteers began meeting to brainstorm ways to garner more interest in the historic building. The willing and invested volunteers agreed it would be realistic to open the courthouse every Saturday from 12-3 p.m. Also, it would be open during special events put on by Metamora, such as car shows on the square, the Trunk or Treat event around Halloween and the Village Christmas in December.

Earlier this summer, the courthouse played host to a very successful wedding gown exhibit. Still, most of the funds for these events came out of the pockets of those willing to volunteer.

Since the state owns the courthouse, raising money solely for the courthouse was tricky, if not impossible. At the very least, they needed a 501c3 status, like the historical society.

But then, Sue brought up a good point. "I asked, 'how is this not the same as the Woodford County Historical Society? We have the same mission...this falls under our area of protection," she said. The other volunteers agreed.

So, the Friends of the Metamora Courthouse was given new life. By joining forces, the Woodford County Historical Society can accept donations and fund raise for the court-house. This isn't the first time such a group existed. History sometimes repeats itself, and Sue said, in a way, this subject has come full circle.

The very first Woodford County Historical Society began. 155 years ago. It was called "The Old Settlers Association," started by residents who lived in the county when it was established in 1841. Most of those first members hailed from Metamora.

"Our roots are honestly in Metamora, because that's where the Old Settlers started," Sue commented. Over the years the group moved their headquarters, renamed themselves (Woodford County Historical Society) and fizzled out a couple of times for different reasons, but the current Woodford County Historical Society has been going strong for more than 50 years. Hopefully the historical society-and the court-house-will make it another 50 years.

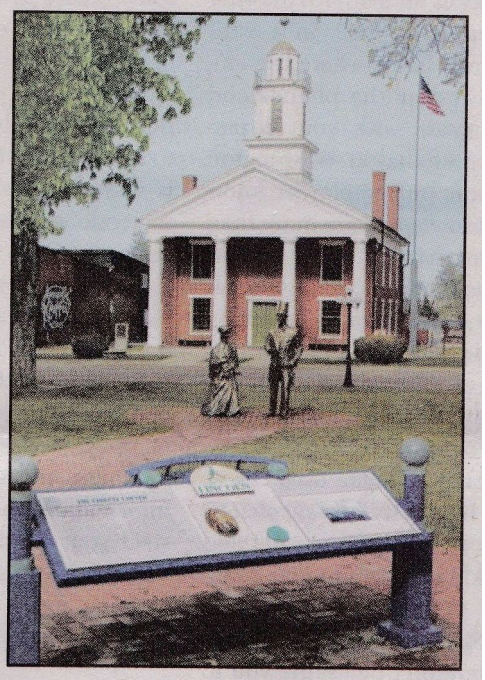
"It's remarkable it's still there," marveled Sue. "Every time I walk into that courtroom, I think, 'He (Lincoln) walked on these floors, how awesome is that?"

It will take a lot of work, though, to ensure this building with so much history has a secure future. "This is only going to happen if we can get people who are willing to volunteer to help us make sure this building lasts for our grandkids and beyond," said Sue.

"We need other people who want to join our effort that are willing to help us in preserving that building. That's my biggest plea."

The Friends of the Metamora Courthouse committee will hold their first meeting on Wednesday, September 3, at 7 p.m. in the Courthouse. It is open to the public and those who want to help are encouraged to attend. For monetary donations, Sue said the public can write a check to the Woodford County Historical Society, and beside the memo line, indicate it's for the Friends of the Metamora Courthouse.

"We are committed to this courthouse," said Sue. "This is a treasure, this is a gem for our county, for our entire Central Illinois, and we need to make sure it lasts." More information can be found on the Metamora Courthouse Facebook page, or by calling the courthouse at 309-367-4470, or the Woodford County Historical Society at 309-360-9945.



The Friends of the Metamora Courthouse are trying to preserve the Courthouse and its legacy. *Picture courtesy of Woodford County Historical Society*